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Rethinking symbols and images, art and
artefacts from history and prehistory

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THE FIVE MEGALITHS OF THE AVEBURY COVE

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Abstract. A review of documents and drawings from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries shows that the Avebury Cove, built in the British Late Neolithic, was unique because it was the result of five positioned megaliths. Four were standing stones while the fifth was a huge triangular stone that served as a dry platform or stage. Suggestions are made as to the intended purpose of the Cove stones that as a group align to the midsummer sunrise, and together function to produce a dramatic cult spectacle known as the Marriage of the Gods.

Key words: Avebury, Beckhampton, cove, midsummer solstice, Stone 206.

Introduction

In British archaeology the term ‘Cove’ is commonly used to denote a megalithic monument of the Neolithic Age comprising three *standing* stones, or sometimes four as at Avebury and Beckhampton in Wessex. There is symmetry of construction that sets a big broad central stone to face a particular desired direction combined with a tall narrow stone standing at each side. At Avebury this three-stone orientation is to the midsummer sunrise while a fourth standing stone—functioning as if it is part of the Cove—is some 25 metres away, almost exactly on the same alignment. At Beckhampton, three kilometres to the west, the orientation of its four-stone cove is to the extreme southerly moonrise.

At Avebury only two megaliths of its Cove have survived the torment of destruction by Christian villagers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Figs. 1, 2). Formerly there were five. This cove-stone grouping centred a 99 /100-metre diameter ring comprising about 27 stones (Fig. 3).

In 1669 Dr. Walter Charleton reported that the Cove

comprised three massive standing stones with an enormous triangular stone lying flat between them (Fig. 4). In addition to any symbolic value that a triangular stone may have been supposed to possess, its presence provided a firm dry platform for activities taking place at that spot.

Dr. Charleton’s illustrative sketch of 1669 labelled these four stones as G, G, G and I, the latter being “A triangular stone, of vast magnitude, lying flat on the ground; but (probably) at first imposed on the heads of the other three, in manner of an Architrave.” However, the others being of uneven height and far apart, the triangular stone was too small to straddle above them.

Yet the Cove had a fifth stone as well. William Stukeley sketched it in 1722 (Fig. 5) and 1723 and it appears too in a colour painting of 1825 by local artist F. Browne (Fig. 6). William Stukeley labelled this additional megalith Stone F on his master aerial plan of the entire monument at Avebury.

In Fig. 7 Stukeley’s sketch of 1723 is modified to include the tall narrow stone that had been destroyed before Stukeley’s arrival (Stukeley 1843, Plate 12). It also



Fig. 1. (Left) Looking towards south-west at the Avebury Cove;



Fig. 2 (right) looking north-east through the gap between two surviving stones to an actual midsummer sunrise

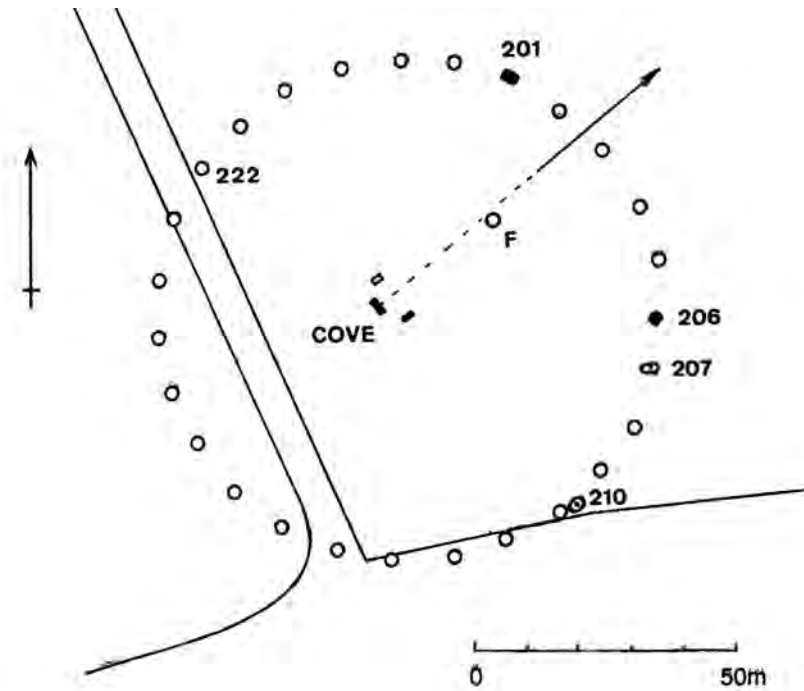


Fig. 3. Plan of the principal stones of the North Circle

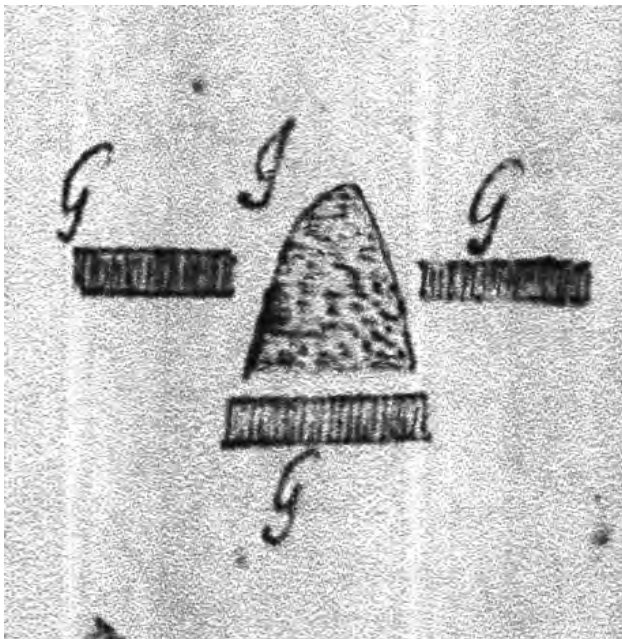


Fig. 4. Part of Dr. Walter Charleton's plan with its schematic indication of the disposition of four closely-grouped cove stones.

illustrates the shadow of the F-stone as it would appear shortly after sunrise on the summer solstice.

Meaning of the monument

Suggestions are now offered as to the meaning of the Avebury Cove stones.

Developing the proposal by Keiller and Piggott (1936) that some of Avebury's stones may have a sexual, hence fertility, connotation, it is possible to propose a realistic interpretation of the meaning of the monument in terms of an agricultural fertility religion, as has been done for Stonehenge. These advances result from applying worldwide knowledge of archaic religions in early agricultural communities to the evidence visible in the planning, disposition and shapes of Avebury's stones.

Archaeologist Isobel Smith (1965), who saw to the publication of the results of

Keiller's excavations expressed a measured view of the shapes of Avebury's stones with these words:

There are Type A stones which are much taller than they are wide, with sides more or less parallel and vertical, which are possibly male; whereas Type B stones are much wider, sometimes broader than their height and are possibly female. The latter are squarish, rhomboidal, or trapezium-like, while the best have the shape of a lozenge or diamond balanced on a point.

On this reckoning the 100-tonne broad middle stone of the cove is pre-eminently feminine, and its two tall narrow



Fig. 5. (left) 1722, a sketch by Stukeley that includes Stone F. The sketch is redrawn to include the missing second tall narrow stone. All four standing stones are here coloured yellow.



Fig. 6. (right) 1825, painting by F. Browne with Stone F, by then damaged, at the left.

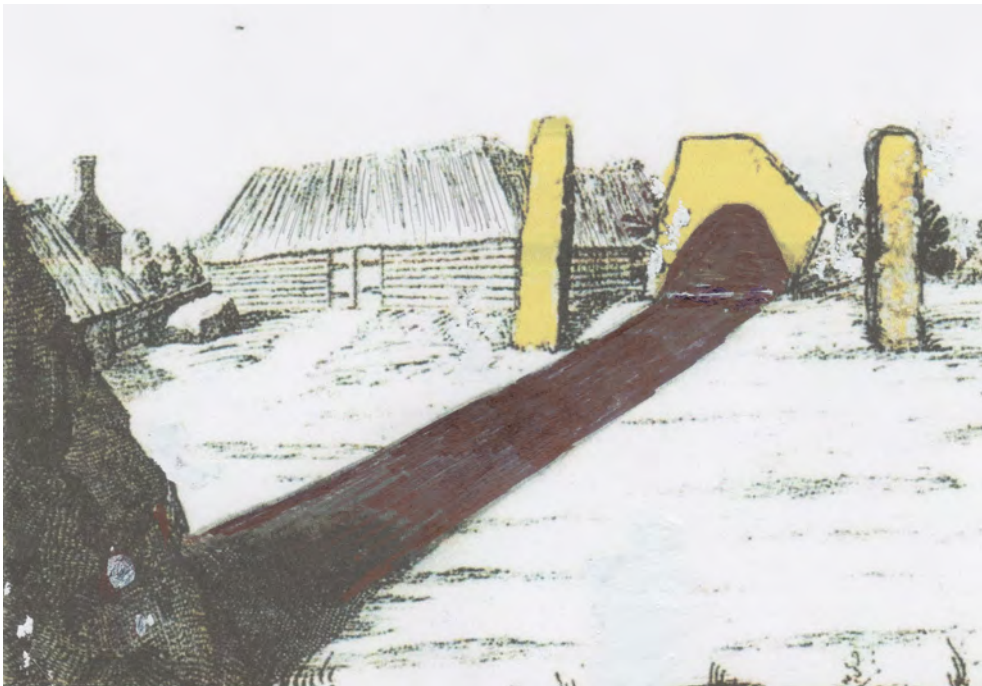


Fig. 7. Sketch by William Stukeley, 1723, redrawn to include the destroyed tall narrow stone so that all four standing megaliths are seen together as at midsummer sunrise.

companions would be phallic and masculine. Stone F is arguably male as well.

This reasoning about the character of the Cove stones is readily reconciled with the universal doctrine that many Neolithic agricultural communities accommodated a belief in primary deities of opposite sex—an Earth Mother and a Sky Father. *This we know because of written sources for numerous historical societies elsewhere, and it can be inferred for prehistoric societies too.* Indeed there are countries where such devotion and worship continue to this

day—as with American Native Indians, and tribal Indians of India, Nepal and Borneo among others including Africa.

Crucial is the recognition that the Cove faces midsummer sunrise, on which morning the iconic female cove stone is *bathed in the light of the rising sun until* the shadow of the well-positioned male megalith (Stone F) completes the Midsummer Marriage.

Lastly, it is valid to mention that the broad side of the great Cove Stone facing south-west—namely towards sunset on midwinter's day—has a face carved into it (Fig. 8). This



Fig. 8. (Left) The profile of a human head carved into the south-western side of the great Cove stone viewed edge on, looking north-west.



Figs. 9. and 10. (Centre and right) Carved heads on a nearby stone, Stone 206

fine sculpture is a subtle creation because it is visible in profile only over a narrow range of angles. Illumination by the sun in mid-morning facilitates its appearance to the gaze of the patient viewer when, in particular, the bulging eyeball is greatly enhanced. Fig. 9 and Fig. 10 introduce two more Neolithic head carvings present on nearby Stone 206 of the surrounding North Circle.

The Avebury Cove could moreover perform as an actual Sacred Marriage or hierogamy between itself and the sun rising over the north-eastern horizon known as Totterdown. Phonetically, the sound of this place-name differs little from Tar'tar'dun—perhaps derived by combining the widely-known Earth Mother title Tara with her traditional partner, the Sky Father Taran. In a proposed scenario involving the hieros gamos, a feminine Cove functions with the midsummer sun rising over the hill of Tar'tar'dun, to invoke visible matrimony recognizable to a watchful audience as a 'Marriage between Gods' (being a divine union like the Sacred Marriage known to classical Greek poets as between Aeneas and Dido, and Zeus and Hera). Even today, the olden, ill-understood, clarion cry and bugle call 'taran-tara' continues to embolden riding communities in Britain. In the opposite direction south-west of Avebury is the 4-km broad hill range that is Tan Hill, into the western end of which the midwinter sun sets. Again, at Stonehenge to its east-north-east is another Totterdown (i.e. possible Tar'tar'dun) from which the Beltane May sun rises.

Meaden and Howley (2013) describe a similar sunrise scenario invoking the core concept of hierogamy for the Irish recumbent stone circle Drombeg. In 2011 Linda Howley discovered that the eastern of the portal stones bears on its north-eastern side an image of a naked male

'embracing' the stone. The alignment to the circle's recumbent megalith parallels the midsummer sunrise, at which time the portal's phallic shadow encounters the recumbent. This union by shadow had been planned into the monument and can be watched happening on sunny mornings in every midsummer week.

Beckhampton Cove: The Longstones

The megalithic Cove at Beckhampton faces the extreme southerly rising of the moon, namely about 143 degrees east of north. The elevation of Folly Hill to its south-east delays moonrise by 10 minutes. Gradually, the orb of the full moon comes into view, shining on Stone B through the gap between Stone A and Stone C (Fig. 11, Fig. 12). Another critical moment follows when the moonlight is obstructed, and the shadow of Stone C falls upon Stone A. It is the nocturnal consummation between Sky and Earth.

Commentators from Stukeley onwards have remarked on the similarity of shape between coves and the curving forecourts of chambered-barrows, and one wonders whether the closure of the latter coincided with the introduction of the former (Burl 1979, 219). That is to say, were the rituals that were practised in Earlier Neolithic barrow forecourts transferred to Later Neolithic coves? As to their nature, Fowler and Blackwell (1999) comment that "long barrows were dedicated to . . . the Earth Mother . . . monumentalised for all time as sacred places of Mother Earth".

Finally, the last two figures (Fig. 13, Fig. 14) are the author's photographs of two of the Beckhampton Avenue stones found buried near the avenue during the excavations led

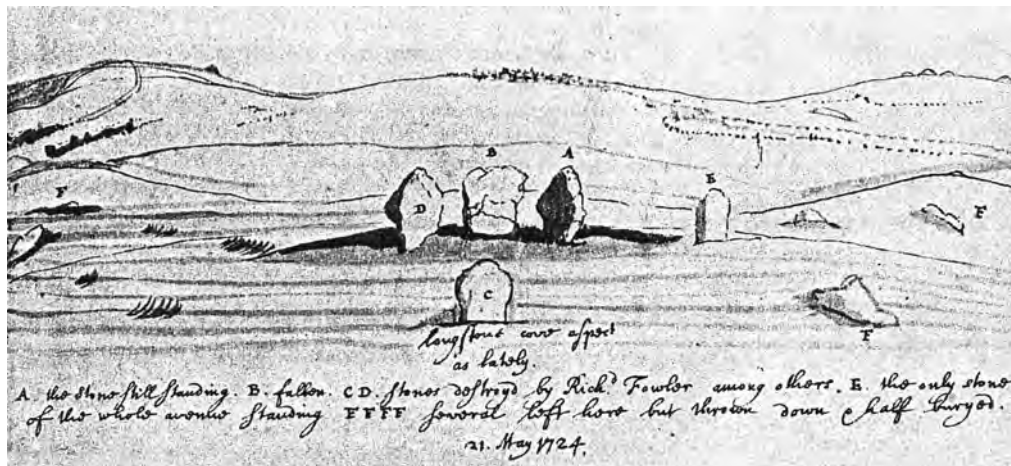


Fig. 11. Stukeley's reconstruction of the cove at Beckhampton (sketch dated 21 May 1724). Stone A of the Cove and Stone E of the Avenue, which survive to this day, are called locally Adam and Eve. At the time of Stukeley's drawing Stone B lay on its back, and several other megaliths F lay fallen. Stones C and D had recently been destroyed.

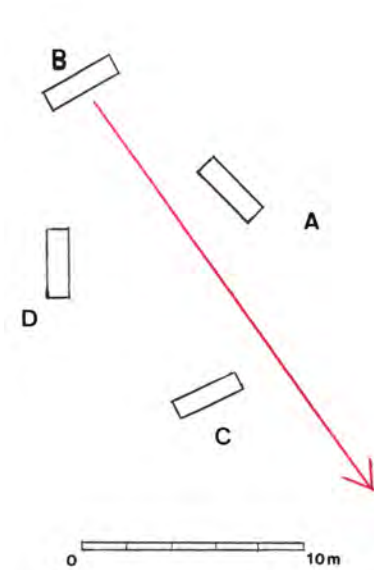


Fig. 12. Beckhampton Cove: Modern plan based on the excavations of 1999 led by Gillings and Pollard. The red line defines the most southerly direction of moonrise over nearby Folly Hill.

by Gillings and Pollard (2004). On symbolic considerations both stones portray feminine symbolism.

Concluding remarks

This study of megaliths at Avebury shows that the three principal stones of Avebury Cove were arranged so that the Cove faced the midsummer sunrise over the hill which is Totterdown, and that the shadow of a fourth standing stone fell upon the middle megalith soon after sunrise. At the Cove a fifth megalith, triangular in shape, lay flat—



Fig. 13. and Fig. 14. Megaliths of the Beckhampton Avenue uncovered in 1999

probably deliberately so—in order to provide a firm dry platform. At Beckhampton Cove the alignment is to the extreme southerly moonrise.

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